

The Leonine Professor:

Geoffrey Blainey – A Writers' profile

Geoffrey Blainey AC is one of Australia's most distinguished historians. He has written thirty books including - *The Tyranny of Distance*, *The Causes of War*, *A Shorter History of Australia* and a history of Aboriginal Australia, *Triumph of the Nomads*. Professor Blainey taught at the University of Melbourne for many years and chaired the Australia Council from 1977 to 1981. He was a delegate to the 1998 Constitutional Convention and has served on many Commonwealth and Victorian government agencies including the Australian War Memorial, the Literature Board, the Australian Heritage Commission and the National Council for the Centenary of Federation. In the year 2000, Professor Blainey was awarded Australia's highest honour, Companion in the Order of Australia (AC). The award recognised his service to academia, research and scholarship and his leadership of public debate on fundamental social and economic issues. His most recent book, *A Short History of the World*, won the prestigious FAW Literature Award in the 2000 National Literary Awards. Professor Blainey is a Life Member of the Fellowship of Australian Writers (Victoria).

Writing a history of the world is certainly no mean feat: H.G Wells succeeded in forty chapters in *The Outline of History* (1920), while more recently, Julian Barnes attempted it in just 10 – in his audaciously titled novel *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters* (1989).

So what prompted one of Australia's most prolific and distinguished historians to write his own short history of the world?

“I had it in my mind in the 1970's to write a history of the world” Blainey explained, “I thought to myself, I've been teaching history and writing history for a long time but I've never put it all together. It's like having pieces of a jigsaw and not really knowing how they fit. I thought this will make me put all the pieces together.”

And so he set about bringing the pieces together in one volume of just thirty-one chapters.

Essentially, Blainey's *A Short History of the World* attempts to integrate some of the many “themes or obsessions” which he has pursued with great passion and vigor throughout the course of his long and illustrious career as both historian and academic. Accordingly, the impact of technology on the human

story; the tyranny of distance; the consequences of geography and the influence of religion are all themes that naturally pervade the book.

As Blainey explains, "The book tries to survey history since before time when the first people left Africa to settle the globe. It explores the development of technology and skills, the rise of major religions and the role of geographical factors, which often ordained what could happen. I found myself fascinated by what people ate and how hard they worked in order to earn their daily bread; by the intense power of the moon, the stars and the night sky on the human experience and on the ways in which the universe was seen."

A naturally gifted writer, Blainey's first published book, the product of a 'freelance writing assignment', was completed at the age of 24. *The Peaks of Lyell* was based on his research and observations of mining at the Mount Lyell Mining and Railway Company on the West Coast of Tasmania. Indeed, at that time Blainey was already considered to be somewhat of a maverick in the sense that he patently "ignored chances to go overseas," instead preferring to channel his passions into writing Australian history "...since so little had been written about so many facets of Australian history." As Monash University Professor of History Graeme Davison has suggested, Blainey's Mount Lyell assignment probably also qualified him as "...the first academically trained Australian historian to earn a living from his pen."

Throughout the course of writing thirty books on Australian history and related themes, Blainey's pen has ranged widely indeed. Aside from his most widely known classic *The Tyranny of Distance* (1966) - which he is currently in the throes of updating - Blainey's titles have included such histories and texts as: *The Rush That Never Ended: A History of Australian Mining* (1963); *The Causes of War* (1973), *Triumph of the Nomads* (1975); *The Blainey View* (1982); and *A Shorter History of Australia* (1994). Blainey's lesser-known works also include such organisational and corporate histories as: *The University of Melbourne: A Centenary Portrait* (1956); *Gold and Paper: A History of the National Bank of Australasia* (1958); and *A History of the AMP* (1999).

Although at times enduring a stormy relationship with the Australian media, Blainey's writings, particularly in the daily press, have always powerfully articulated his views in his own unique and inimitable style.

No doubt the height of such turbulence was reached in the 1980's when a speech he gave at a Rotary conference ignited a fierce debate over Australia's

immigration policies. As Michael Gordon recently reflected last year in Melbourne's *The Age* newspaper, "Blainey endured months of aggravation and abuse followed by years of alienation."

Despite this turbulent period in his own history, Geoffrey Blainey remains as one of Australia's pre-eminent social and historical commentators. No doubt his prolific contributions to Australia's daily newspapers have continued to ensure his "bone fide membership of...a rare club, those public intellectuals whose works are read by ordinary people."

So, how does this prolific writer view the art and craft of writing? For Geoffrey Blainey, writing is a skilled trade that also demands a high degree of self-discipline, "Writing for most of us is a skilled trade...Like any other skilled trade it consists of a wide variety of other skills. You just have to put a lot of time into it...You've just got to make time" he muses.

And does he have a particular pattern or mode of working that allows him to undertake such gargantuan projects? Certainly, although his philosophy is very modest and workmanlike. He uses the analogy of the bricklayer to make his point: "One of the simplest things I have found is to count the number of words that I write...I think a darg [a definite amount of work] like a bricklayer is important."

Tone and pace are also very important tools in plying the writers' trade. Blainey uses a cricketing analogy to describe his employment of periods of "fast and slow bowling" in his writing of *A Short History of the World*, implying that tone and pace are very useful instruments in controlling the flow of the text as it unfolds.

Indeed, another curious metaphor which arose in my discussion with Geoffrey Blainey about his methods of reading and writing was his notion of "reading magpie fashion," - a habit which particularly stood him in good stead on the long journey of reading and writing his *Short History*. Similarly, The Australian National University's Dr Tom Griffiths has also used the 'magpie metaphor' in describing Blainey's writing *modus operandi*: "Blainey prods the earth inquisitively, feeds quirkily, collects sustenance in a proudly idiosyncratic way. His voice is rich, his song mellifluous! And, as the bird books warn us, he can be territorial, launching surprise attacks, especially in defense of his nest [!]."

And what are his views on the current generation of Australian Writers? "My

feeling is that there really is a lot of talent in Australian writing at present ” he suggests. Indeed, Blainey remains in “no way pessimistic” about the future of writing in Australia, although like many historical epochs, he sees the rise and fall of writing talent as a cyclical phenomenon.

So, having conquered the world in short history what's next on Geoffrey Blainey's list of writing projects?

Aside from undertaking to update his most widely known work - The Tyranny of Distance - Blainey has turned lately turned his mind to writing an autobiography although “...whether or not I'll release it or not is another thing...” he muses.

Always a writer in search of another challenge, Blainey also suggested that he would like to take on yet “another large project.” In writing his A Short History of the World he “...got great pleasure out of writing that book...,” while he was most gracious in accepting that “...there were difficulties and I'm conscious that people quite legitimately criticise what's left out but I accept that...”

So, once again Geoffrey Blainey has been doing “...a lot of magpie reading lately...Perhaps a short history of the world in the last hundred years...or a history of people reaching remote places...” he contemplates.

No doubt whatever project he next turns his pen to, Geoffrey Blainey will continue to write with the same passion, vigor and eloquence which have lead him to become one of Australia's most prolific and distinguished historians.

Interview and Story by Marcus D. Niski, © 2001.

Originally published in The Australian Writer # 326